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**1<sup>st</sup> John 4:1–3, NLT.**

*Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world. <sup>2</sup> This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God. <sup>3</sup> But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here.*

**1<sup>st</sup> John 4:4–6, NLT.**

*<sup>4</sup> But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world. <sup>5</sup> Those people belong to this world, so they speak from the world's viewpoint, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup> But we belong to God, and those who know God listen to us. If they do not belong to God, they do not listen to us. That is how we know if someone has the Spirit of truth or the spirit of deception.*

**1<sup>st</sup> John 4:7–8, NLT.**

*<sup>7</sup> Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*

**1<sup>st</sup> John 2:1–2, NLT.**

*My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. <sup>2</sup> He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins— and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.*

## **Orthodox faith.**

1<sup>st</sup> John is an intriguing letter. On one hand, it is elegant and very compelling. It uses simple language, in the Greek, that is, with a vocabulary of only 303 Greek words. The letter is widely seen as being direct and simple, yet subtle and mystical. Although it is constructed as a letter, it is really a sermon that lays out the basic principles of being a Christian, while at the same time warning readers about lies and mistruths that some people will preach to them. But while it is a beautiful piece of writing, it is, on the other hand, not laid out in a traditional, organized fashion. It is not a well-honed essay. This is because the author does not list concepts in a logical, orderly fashion. Instead, the author weaves together a handful of important ideas and returns to them over and over. It is repetitious.

The author had a clear motivation in writing the letter, and it is a problem that Paul the Great Evangelist to the Gentiles often confronted in the letters he wrote to various churches and individuals: there were people associated with the church who did not follow the basic teachings of Jesus Christ, and were attempting to mold their own, twisted version of the emerging Christian faith. He uses a very strong word to refer to these teachers: antichrists. But the author does not focus on what these people are teaching; we don't know the precise nature of what they taught. The author of 1<sup>st</sup> John was concerned only with delivering the truth.

But just who is this author, John? Traditionally, the Gospel of John, and 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> John are all attributed to the Apostle John. What's true is that the three letters are very closely related to the Gospel of John. Either the same person wrote them all or the author of the letters studied that Gospel diligently. To complicate things, though, it's not clear that the three letters were written by the same person, and if the Apostle John wrote any of the three letters, he would have had to be very elderly when he wrote them. To make things even more complicated, there is great debate over the authorship of the Gospel of John: it might well not be the Apostle. In the end, all that matters for us today is that 1<sup>st</sup> John does a magnificent job of laying out the basics of true, orthodox Christianity, and it was written very early in the evolution of the Christian faith. It is a key document for any believer to read.

One last issue before I get down to the focus of this message: who were the recipients of 1<sup>st</sup> John? It is believed that it was written in Ephesus and sent to churches in Asia Minor, now modern Turkey. This is because John the Apostle is believed to have founded these churches and the school of thought that arose around John the Apostle was based in Ephesus. The letters were probably written around the year 100, and together with the Gospel, they form a beautiful whole.

So, what does 1<sup>st</sup> John teach us? Because of the repetitive nature of the letter, we can find many of the basic teachings of the letter covered closely

together in various places in the letter. Consider the first three verses of Chapter 4: *Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world.* <sup>2</sup> *This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God.* <sup>3</sup> *But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here.* This is a warning that we hear multiple times in the letter, and we read it in various letters of Paul. One thing is very intriguing: in many ways, we need a similar warning today. John says that that we need to be careful about people who claim to be teaching the basics of our faith. It's clear here that John is worried about people who are teaching that Jesus was never fully human, that he was a god parading around as a person, but not truly a human.

Consider the next three verses of Chapter 4: <sup>4</sup> *But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world.* <sup>5</sup> *Those people belong to this world, so they speak from the world's viewpoint, and the world listens to them.* <sup>6</sup> *But we belong to God, and those who know God listen to us. If they do not*

*belong to God, they do not listen to us. That is how we know if someone has the Spirit of truth or the spirit of deception.* This is a warning that again is very relevant today: our faith is in many ways not consistent with the values of the world around us. We have to be very careful about people who want to somehow compromise, to make the teachings of Christianity mesh with worldly values. What probably caused John to write these lines is that like today, there are people who teach that it's not necessary to believe that Jesus is God. In other words, there were both people who taught that Jesus was only God and not a man, and there were also people who were far more worldly and taught that Jesus was just a man. Today, we must worry about this in a big way: it's popular to teach that Jesus was just a truly holy man who was a bit nuts and thought he was God, but he taught us to have fantastic ethical values. There are many people who propret to be Christians, while at the same time saying that we should focus on what Jesus taught, not on the myth than he was a man-God. But orthodox faith, the true teachings of Christianity are clear: Jesus was both man and God at the same time.

Here are the next two verses, 7 and 8, of Chapter 4 of 1<sup>st</sup> John: <sup>7</sup>*Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God.* <sup>8</sup>*But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.* This is a theme that John focuses on heavily in this letter. You

cannot claim to be a believer, to be a follower of Christ, if you do not show the same sort of unconditional love that Jesus showed for all people. John teaches that love is the greatest gift that God gives us. He tells us that we cannot learn to love on our own, that love isn't something that begins with us. Love starts with God and comes to us. Only then can we offer love to others. This is another lesson that is very important for us today: our faith teaches us that we cannot build a moral, ethical society where everyone is treated fairly and with love unless we do it through God. We cannot do it on our own. When we act on our own, when we try to separate ourselves from God and build a culture that is entirely humanist, we fail. We need God to guide us through life, and the very first step is to accept God's love. Armed with this, we can go out into the world and offer our love to others.

Let's step back and look at the first two verses of the second chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> John: *My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. <sup>2</sup> He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.* This is another major theme of John's, and it is something that many educated, sophisticated, influential people in our society today deny: that sin is a real thing. John tells us that there is something worse than simply offending other people or disobeying a rule created

by human beings. We can truly, deeply offend God by going against the laws of God. John says that we need help when it comes to sin. We need to avoid it, but as people, it is very hard to live a truly sinless life. When we do sin, though, there is someone we can turn to: Jesus Christ, that person who is God and did indeed come to Earth as a human. Jesus will, in effect, be our lawyer before God. Jesus will accept our admission of guilt and Jesus will cleanse us of our sins. Here is the reason, John tells us, that Jesus can do this: Jesus sacrificed his human life, Jesus became a man and truly suffered as a human on a cross, so that we could be forgiven of our sins. If we do not believe this, we can never free ourselves of sin. John wants the readers of his letter to see a strong parallel between the animal and plant sacrifices of Jews in the Temple and the sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus sacrificed himself to free us from the need to somehow make things right with God. We must believe, as followers of Christ, that Jesus in a literal fashion, frees us from our sins.

There is more to this point of John's, that Jesus offered himself up in sacrifice for us. Here are verses 5 through 10 of the first Chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> John: *This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. <sup>6</sup> So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. <sup>7</sup> But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other,*

*and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. <sup>8</sup> If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. <sup>9</sup> But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. <sup>10</sup> If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.* This is another very important theme of 1<sup>st</sup> John: that God is light, that if we want to walk in the light, if we want to live the way God wants us to live, we must honor God's requirement that we reflect the love that God gives us. John uses the metaphor of light, which is used in many places in Scripture, to represent the great, eternal truths given to us by God. He says that by following the teachings of Christ, we can remain completely in the light. We will never be in darkness. But we cannot be hypocrites; we cannot say that we are living in the light but secretly live in spiritual darkness. There is no compromise to being a true follower of Christ. Jesus is the one who can forgive us of our sins and cleanse us, and again, John tells us this is because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. We must admit that we do sin, and we must have God in our hearts. There is a subtlety in this passage that is very important. John says that if we truly live in the light, then we will have fellowship with each other, while at the same time having fellowship with Jesus. In other words, sharing our faith with each other, helping each other maintain and build our faith – that is a core aspect of being a

believer. We cannot do it alone. We need God. And we need each other. This is why the early Christians began to build countless home churches – it was a way to quickly bootstrap a true fellowship between followers of Christ.

There is one last thing about 1<sup>st</sup> John: it has to do with something else that modern people, especially highly educated ones, like to dismiss: the notion that we can have eternal life. Here are verses 11 to 13 of Chapter 5 of 1<sup>st</sup> John: <sup>11</sup> *And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.* <sup>12</sup> *Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life.* <sup>13</sup> *I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life.* I personally do not care if people argue about whether you must be a literal believer in all that is in the Bible to live with God for eternity, or if perhaps all that is necessary is that you live by the laws Jesus taught us in the Gospel of Matthew: to love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and to love all other people no matter who they are. But no matter what, orthodox Christianity is clear: you must follow Christ to live in grace forever. And most importantly, there is an eternal life waiting for us. Please pray briefly with me.

*God, we thank you for the Gospels, this history told in the New Testament, and for the many letters collected there. They tell us how to find the path to you and how to stay on it. Amen.*